WILLIAM ELLERY CHANNING

PAUL REVERE FROTHINGHAM

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William Ellery Channing

HIS MESSAGES FROM THE SPIRIT

BY

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MINISTER OF
THE ARLINGTON STREET CHURCH
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TO THE MEMBERS

OF THE

ARLINGTON STREET CHURCH

WHO CHERISH THE MEMORY

OF THEIR

GREAT LEADER

AND MAINTAIN THE

SPIRITUAL FREEDOM

HE PROCLAIMED

PREFACE

A STATUE of William Ellery Channing was unveiled in Boston on June 1, 1903 — one hundred years after the beginning of his eventful ministry. This statue, which is the work of Herbert Adams, of New York, was made possible by the generosity of John Foster, a former member of the Arlington Street Church. Mr. Foster died April 9, 1897. His will contained the following clause, which is important as explaining the character of the monument and its situation: —

"I give and bequeath to the city of Boston the sum of thirty thousand

dollars, or so much thereof as may be necessary, for the purpose of erecting a monumental statue of the late Reverend William Ellery Channing, with a canopy over the same, to be placed in the Public Garden opposite the Arlington Street Church."

The address which follows was delivered in the church on Sunday, May 31, 1903, the day before the formal exercises of dedication. Except for a few changes, it is printed as it was spoken.

WILLIAM ELLERY CHANNING

ON the first day of June, 1803, William Ellery Channing was ordained to the Christian ministry, and installed as pastor of the Federal Street, now the Arlington Street Church of Boston.

How little did the people suspect as they came together in their simple meeting-house, which stood in what is now a crowded business section of the city, that the young man, twenty-three years old, frail of form and pale of face, whom they saw ascend the pulpit stairs was soon to become one of the greatest of all American religious leaders! How little did the ministers who took part in the solemn service of ordination suspect that here was

one who would overthrow the strongholds of traditional opinion, and send his prophetic words around the world!

The Society was in a weakened condition when Channing was invited to become its minister. The "Letter Missive" which was sent to the sister churches in the neighborhood, inviting them to take part in the solemn and important service, is interesting in the light of after events.

"Honored and Beloved," the letter reads, as I find it in the records of our church, "The Providence of God having preserved us in peace and unity during our destitute state, and having led us to the choice of William E. Channing, and him to accept of our united invitation, we therefore request your presence and assistance by your pastor and delegates on Wednesday the first day of June next to join with other churches in solemnly separating him to the work of the ministry

with us. We ask your prayers for him and for us, that he may come to us in the fulness of the blessing of the gospel of peace."

So far as I am aware only one description from an eye-witness has come down to us of that ordination service. It is from the pen of George Ticknor, who was a boy at the time, and whose father, a member of the council, led him by the hand into the church. "I have no recollection of anything in the services of that day," he wrote years afterwards, "till they were about to be concluded. Then the pale, spiritual looking young man, whose consecration I had witnessed, rose and announced the closing hymn. My attention was immediately fastened on him, and particularly on his visible emotion. His looks, the tones of his trembling voice, and devout air are still present to me, whenever the scene comes up in my thoughts. After the

hymn had been sung, he rose once more, and in the same tender and devout manner pronounced a very simple benediction. In this, too, I see him still freshly before me, with his upcast eyes, and remember thinking how spiritual he was."[1]

The centennial of this religious event is signalized in a fortunate and fitting way. Channing has come again to Boston; and not his church only, but the whole city gives him welcome. One hundred years after his formal ordination we install him in enduring bronze to become a perpetual presence with us, and to preach with silent lips those mighty truths which the world still needs to hear and understand.

In 1842, when he lay dying among the hills of Vermont, in the little town of Bennington, the western sun lighting up a face that always was aglow

[1] *Life*, by Wm. H. Channing, one-volume ed. p. 96.

with heavenly thoughts, a friend who was bending over him heard him murmur with departing breath, "I have received many messages from the Spirit." They were the last words he spoke, and we hardly can do better than to make them of central importance in our thoughts. "I have received many messages from the Spirit." What these messages were, how he received and spoke them, to what extent they were significant and of permanent value, cannot fail to be interesting matters to consider.

It has happened over and over again in the course of history that the good and great, the inspired and prophetic among men and women, have dated their spiritual careers from some definite period or moment in their lives when they seemed to be born anew and commissioned from on high with great and glorious thoughts.

Thus it was with the Hebrew pro-

phet "in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, in the fifth day of the month," as he stood by the river of Chebar. For then and there the heavens were opened to Ezekiel, and he "saw visions of God, and the hand of the Lord was upon him, and the spirit of the Lord entered" into him. The great Apostle, too, as he journeyed and came near Damascus, was suddenly blinded by a great light that "shined round about him" as from heaven, and he fell to the earth, only to rise again in power, and begin his missionary journeys. Luther declared that as he pondered on the words, "The just shall live by faith," their full meaning suddenly became revealed, and it seemed, he said, "that I had entered through open doors into Paradise itself." Wordsworth felt himself "a dedicated spirit" from the moment when, returning late from some careless revelry, the glory of the rising sun painted the

roadway and the valley at his feet. Thus it was in full degree with Channing, to his own great exaltation and the vast advantage of the world. As a youth in college he was walking, book in hand, beneath a clump of willows in a Cambridge meadow, where a beautiful view was gained of the Brookline hills "across green fields and the glistening river." He had been reading certain passages in a popular treatise on philosophy in regard to "man's capacity for affection and self-sacrifice, and devotion to absolute and universal good," when lo! there burst upon his mind that view of the dignity of human nature which thenceforth was to be the central inspiration of his life and thought. "The place and hour," we are told, "were always sacred in his memory, and he frequently referred to them with grateful awe. It seemed to him that he then passed through a new

spiritual birth, and entered upon the day of eternal peace and joy." He had received his first great message from the Spirit which for more than forty rich and fruitful years was to color all he thought and said. Indeed, all other messages were hardly more than echoes and distinct reverberations from the lofty mountain sides of this great truth, which took such full possession of his youthful mind.

But spiritual is like physical birth, and has its antecedents. Before we pass, therefore, to a consideration of Channing's thought and teachings we may give a moment's attention to the path by which his spiritual steps were led to this mount of heavenly vision.

William Ellery Channing was born in Newport, R. I., on the seventh day of April, 1780. He was fortunate in the place of his birth, where he passed not only his early years, but long pe-

riods of rest and recreation his whole life through. For Newport in those days was not the place of fashion that it is in these. Wealth had not spoiled it, nor had luxury appeared in its present barbarous display. The natural beauties were undisturbed by frivolity and social rivalries. The rocky cliffs rose up majestically from the purple sea which broke in white confusion at their feet and murmured ceaselessly of deep and mystic forces. The mighty beach was a spot for quiet and lonely meditation whether shining in the sunlight or solemn in the storm. On these glories of nature the eyes of the young man feasted, and they brought him messages of awe and reverence and faith. He said at a later day, "I believe that the worship of which I have spoken was aided in my soul by the scenes in which my early life was passed."

But his inheritance was more signi-

ficant than his environment. His birth was a prophecy even as his life was a fulfillment. His father was a lawyer of prominence and ability. Dying in middle life, he had held the offices of Attorney-General, and United States District Attorney for Rhode Island. The boy remembered how Washington once had been his father's guest, and had sat at the family table. The mother, on the other hand, was a daughter of William Ellery, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Law and liberty, therefore, met and were united in the son. The love of order was mingled in him with the craving for progress. Justice and liberty entered into the very fibres of his being. He was born at the time when the country was just beginning her career of independence, and he was distinctly the heir of her early hopes and aspirations.

There was an interesting episode in

his college career which clearly indicates the temper of his mind and the fashion of his will. When he came to graduate at Harvard he was chosen to deliver the Commencement oration for his class, which was the highest of all the honors. The President and Governing Board of the college, however, on account of certain "inconveniences" which had arisen in the past, imposed the restriction that all political discussion should be excluded. The young man refused to perform the part unless given entire liberty of speech, and sent in his resignation. The Faculty at first made light of the matter and thought he would hardly endanger his degree for so slight a cause. But Channing was Channing even then. He held to his point, and demanded entire freedom of expression; and the college authorities were at last obliged to make concessions.

All things had thus prepared the

way for the time when he saw the heavens open underneath the Cambridge willows, and received his first great message from the Spirit. The rapturous vision, to which we have referred already, so bore him away that he said to a friend in after years, "I longed to die, and felt as if heaven alone could give room for the exercise of such emotions."[1]

Let us ask precisely what this central message was, for in this way we shall penetrate the secret of his whole career, and perceive the full significance of what he came to teach.

In his later life, when the tide of his thought had reached its fullest flood, he spoke of this message from on high as his "one sublime idea." "In my own labors," he wrote to a friend in 1837, "there has been more unity perhaps in consequence of the strong hold which one sublime idea has taken

[1] *Life*, p. 32.

of my mind. This is the greatness of the soul, its divinity, its union with God by spiritual likeness." [1] In simpler speech he often called this thought "the dignity of human nature." It stood out in the bolder outline because of the doctrine of the *depravity* of human nature, which was taught in his day with strange and morbid persistency. He spoke in strong and bold revolt, therefore, from the theology of his time, when he said that he did and must "*reverence* human nature." "I see the marks of God," he declared, "in the heavens and the earth: but how much more in a liberal intellect, in magnanimity, in unconquerable rectitude. Neither the sneers of a worldly skepticism nor the groans of a gloomy theology disturb my faith in the godlike powers and tendencies of human nature." "I bless it," he cried, "for its kind affections — I honor it

[1] *Life*, p. 445.

for its examples of heroic and saintly virtue. These are marks of a divine origin and the pledges of a celestial inheritance."[1]

This thought is so familiar to us now, being taught with clearness in the Bible, that we can hardly comprehend the stir it made when Channing set it forth a century ago. It was the message needed at the hour, for which, unconsciously, the people had been waiting. It was full of inspiration, too, and entering into the hearts and minds of others, supplied them with the light and heat they craved. Emerson lighted his glowing torch at this central flame of Channing's faith. To him it meant "self-reliance" and spiritual insight and the promise of new and larger revelations of spiritual truth. If the disciple carried the light into hidden places which the master had neglected to explore, that is only added testimony to

[1] *Works*, one-volume edition, p. 298.

the value of the truth itself. It flamed up high, no less, in Theodore Parker's mighty gospel of God's goodness and man's greatness. When men heard Parker thunder out his truths in Music Hall, declaring that "the material splendors of the world, grand and gorgeous as they are, seem very little when measured by the spiritual glories of the meanest man," they were listening to intellectual reverberations which followed the electrical bolts that flashed from Channing in the pulpit on Federal Street. His was the hand that snatched the truth anew from heaven, and grandly did he utter it. "I know of but one elevation of a human being," he could say, "and that is elevation of soul. Without this it matters nothing where a man stands, or what he possesses; and with it he towers, he is one of God's nobility, no matter what place he holds in the social scale."[1]

[1] *Works*, p. 42.

"A man is great as man," he added, "be he where or what he may."[1]

Again and yet again, with ever-widening application he gave expression to his thought. He believed in the universal miracle of the human soul, which alone accounts for progress, and it never ceased to fill him with ardor and devotion. "We hear this great truth unmoved," he said: "but it is a truth to wake the dead. It ought to exalt our whole life into joy."[2]

As this was the central thought that led Channing into theological revolt and religious leadership, and into brave, determined efforts for social reform, we can hardly do much better than to keep it in mind and let it interpret for us the various messages of spiritual life with which his name will ever be associated.

[1] *Works*, p. 12.
[2] *Works*, p. 945.

First of all, it was impossible for Channing to reverence human nature as he did and not to revolt from the doctrines that were taught in the churches of his day concerning God. If goodness, justice, and affection were sublime and beautiful in man, then these must also be the qualities that belonged to God Himself. "We object," he said in his great Baltimore Sermon, "to the systems of religion which prevail among us . . . that they take from us the Father in Heaven, and substitute for Him a being whom we cannot love if we would, and whom we ought not to love if we could."[1]

Channing's heresy, therefore, — for such at the time it was deemed, — was based on human and moral, much more than on speculative and theological grounds. What he objected to most strongly was Calvinism, not Trinitarianism, which are two very different

[1] *Works*, p. 377.

things. He took no joy in controversy. He was a lover of peace in all things and shrank from conflict. He would have preferred to remain silent on points of difference, and it was only the published charge of "hypocrisy," and "cowardly concealment of principle," and of "operating in secret," that forced him to speak out and lead the great attack at last.

In these days of suggested congregational unity it is well to remember, too, that the doors of fellowship were rudely shut upon the liberals. Channing and his friends were forced to leave the central body, much against their will, and they went in sorrow all their days at the division.

It was natural, therefore, that his doctrinal period should have been contracted. He preached but three or four great controversial sermons, and then applied himself to the more congenial task of unfolding those larger

messages from the Spirit in which there was life and light for all. It was not necessary for him to speak often, however. A single shot of his, we may almost say, was heard round the world. The Baltimore Sermon was read everywhere, being rushed through edition after edition. Indeed, it was ten years before any publication in America had so large a circulation as that sermon on "Unitarian Christianity."[1] No other preacher in America since — not Parker with his fierce invectives, nor Beecher with his noble eloquence, nor Phillips Brooks with his torrent of spiritual thought — has exercised such influence, or left his essential thoughts a legacy in so many channels. Channing has had no successor who can bend his bow.

As his "Sublime Idea" affected and controlled his thought of God, so it likewise was, most naturally, as re-

[1] *Life*, by J. W. Chadwick, p. 147.

gards the other cardinal beliefs of the religious life. Here was the pearl of greatest price which embodied in itself the glory and value of the entire kingdom; here was the seed that being planted in the soil of thought grew into a spreading tree of theological conviction and sheltered many singing truths in its great and spreading branches.

He himself said: "This great view binds together all other truth. I think of God as the Father and Inspirer of the soul, of Christ as its redeemer and model, of Christianity as given to enlighten, perfect, and glorify it, of the universe as its school, of life as appointed for its discipline. Love to God seems to me to be founded not on His outward benefits, but on regard to Him as the Father of the Spirit, present to it, dwelling in it, calling it by conscience and by His providence to perfection. Love to man has no foun-

dation but in the comprehension of his spiritual nature, and of his spiritual connection with God."

Some one has said that there are three great features in the religious life which are "wrought into our fibres by a million hands." They are "Deity, Duty, Destiny." As Channing's thought was clear in regard to the first, so it likewise was in regard to the other two. He saw in the sense of duty "a ray of divinity in man." It was "the greatest gift of God." The idea of right appeared to him "the primary and the highest revelation of God to the human mind, and all outward revelations are founded on and addressed to it. All mysteries of science and theology fade away," he declared, "before the grandeur of the simple perception of duty." [1]

There was no thought with him of such a thing as "mere morality." For

[1] *Works*, p. 69.

"the love of God" was, to his mind, "but another name for the love of essential benevolence and justice," and the object of religion is not to raise us "to something higher than morality, for that would be to raise us above God Himself; but to give us sublime ideas of morality."

Nor was it different with the question of man's destiny. What we should expect, we find. If man's nature was in part divine, if the human soul was akin to God, then immortality was a matter of course. He believed in a future life for man, because he believed that man's nature fitted him to live forever. His faith rested "very little on mere affection; but very much on the *fact* of human excellence." It seemed to him "as natural for virtue to *live* as for the animal to breathe;" and he could say, "virtue is the only thing in the Universe of the continuance of which I am sure, for it is of the

very essence of God. Everything else may pass away: this cannot."[1]

Let us turn away, however, from what is theological and come to the wider fields of practical life and political as well as social reform. For here the messages from the Spirit were even more distinct, while they were also charged with deep and far-reaching influence. We need to hear them speaking to us still as he himself first gave them utterance, and never did we need them more than in many of the complicated situations which confront us as a nation at the present time.

Nothing, for example, was much more characteristic of Channing, nor more evidently a consequence of his cardinal principle, than his ardent, never-fading love of liberty. He was a true American, independent and self-reliant to the core. It was as clear to him as it later was to Emerson, that

[1] *Life*, p. 628.

Freedom was a heavenly gift and a human right.

> "For he that worketh high and wise
> Nor pauses in his plan,
> Will take the Sun out of the skies,
> Ere Freedom out of man."

Nor did he ever falter in his faith, nor deny to others what he treasured for himself. He read his message, too, into religious as well as political interests.

There is one anecdote told of him that cannot be repeated too often. None other is more characteristic of the man. When, in 1830, news came of the three days' revolution in Paris, his heart was kindled with eager hope. Here was a new assertion, he believed, of the "Rights of Man." He returned to Boston earlier than usual from his summer home, and poured his soul out from the pulpit with all manner of bright anticipations for the future of society. But the pulse of critical Bos-

ton gave no responsive flutter. His enthusiasm was not shared. The people in the pews were cold. Even the young men in Harvard seemed to have no eagerness such as he had felt and given vent to in his college days. One evening a recent graduate called upon him, and, as the great-souled prophet gave expression to his hopes, the visitor remarked on leaving, "Really, Dr. Channing, you seem to me the only young man I know!" And the pale cheek flushed and the great eyes glowed as the voice rang out in answer, "Always young for Liberty!"

And so it was. Years of struggle and of serious misunderstanding never dimmed his ardor. He reverenced nothing more than the mind that was free. He could say with passionate earnestness: "I call that mind free which resists the bondage of habit, which does not content itself with a passive or hereditary faith, which re-

ceives new truth as an angel from heaven, which sets no bounds to its love, which is not imprisoned in itself or in a sect; I call that mind free which does not cower to human opinion, which feels itself accountable to a higher tribunal than man's, which respects itself too much to be the slave or tool of the many or of the few . . . which guards its empire over itself as nobler than the empire of the world." [1] It even seemed to him "a good plan ever and anon to make a clean sweep of that to which we have arrived by logical thought and take a new view; for the mind needs the baptism of wonder and hope to keep it vigorous and healthy for intuitions."

He himself was steadily reaching out; discarding the old and taking on the new. He was never satisfied as one who had arrived; but would spend hours and even days occupied with

[1] *Works*, p. 174.

the same great thoughts, turning them over and over in his mind, and bringing the conversation back to them when his companions had grown weary. His brother ministers complained that he was seldom ready for levity and idle cheer; but drew them ceaselessly to the mountain tops of talk, where bright clouds of speculative interest transfigured him before them. Thus he was ever —

"Yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought."

When he entered on the study for the ministry, at the age of twenty, it was with a keen desire "to know what Christ taught, not what men have made him teach." At a later time he "charged" a brother preacher not to "feel as if Christianity had spoken its last word," for, he said, "it is the characteristic of divine truth that it is infinitely fruitful."

It was this inherited love of liberty, which became intensified by the entire process of his thought, that made him distrustful of all sects. He was even disinclined to have the liberal movement organize itself under the Unitarian name and thus become a separate body moving in a self-appointed orbit through the Christian sky. Years before the theological controversy which forced him into isolation had begun to rage, and while still a youth of twenty summers, he had written in ecstasy: "Let charity embrace in her broad arms all sects! Why should I brand any who differ from me with opprobrious epithets? Let me unite with all who love Jesus Christ in sincerity in propagating His religion." Like Martineau at a later day, he dreaded all religious shackles, and cared for spiritual union only. He would leave each individual free to think his own thoughts and speak his own especial

word. "For myself," he said, "I wish to regard myself as belonging not to a sect, but to the community of free minds, of lovers of truth, of followers of Christ, both on earth and in heaven. I desire to escape the narrow walls of a particular church, and to live under the open sky, in the broad light, looking far and wide, seeing with my own eyes, hearing with my own ears, and following truth meekly, but resolutely, however arduous or solitary be the path in which she leads."[1]

He believed, therefore, in the universal church, which should be wide enough to embrace all sincere Christians. For his own part he claimed that no one could separate him from kinship with the great and holy ones of the past, — from Fénelon or Pascal, Borromeo or Jeremy Taylor. Only the death of goodness in a man's own breast could excommunicate him from

[1] *Works*, p. 247.

this greater church of the spirit, which had no bond but purity, no creed but virtue.

Many, however, in the course of history have felt as he did in this great respect, but they have often hesitated to allow to others that entire freedom of thought which they exercised for themselves. Luther had proclaimed with boldness the right of individual private judgment; but it proved at times to be *his* judgment, and not their own, that the Reformers were expected to follow. Our forefathers sought upon these shores "freedom to worship God;" but it was freedom for themselves, and not for others, as they tried to teach the Quakers. It was not thus with Channing. When other, and much younger men were engaged in crying Emerson down and accusing him of infidelity, Channing never expressed anything but pleasure and essential agreement with his teaching.

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put to a still more crucial test when Theodore Parker broke through the narrow limits of the little fold, and preached a sermon which boldly set apart the "transient" from the "permanent" in Christianity. The sermon played particular havoc with many a belief that Channing, in company with others, deemed essential. But the great soul did not falter. Freedom of thought must be allowed. When almost the entire fellowship was loud and vehement in censure, threatening to turn the heretic out, Channing rose perhaps to his greatest height of tolerance and magnanimity. He did not

[1] Letter to Miss Peabody.

agree with Parker. His distress was deep. But the soul must still be free. "Give my love to Mr. Parker," he wrote when others were pouring forth their words of rage; "I trust the account of attempts to put him down was, in the main, a fiction. Let the full heart pour itself forth. Let the honest, earnest spirit speak, and the more fully and freely for attempts to put it to silence." [1]

We have lingered long before speaking of Channing's service along the lines of Social Reform. Such service was to be expected. The prophet whose "one sublime idea" was the dignity of human nature, the divinity of the soul, the greatness of man; who believed with Novalis that "we touch heaven when we lay our hand in a human grasp," could hardly help being an influence either directly or indirectly, face to face or through his

[1] *Life*, p. 453.

writings, for the elevation of the race, for the improvement of the laborer's lot, for the alleviation of the poor, for the spread of justice, love, and peace, for the kingdom of God on earth. In these days of a new enthusiasm for humanity it is no unusual thing for a minister to devote his noblest energies to interests like these. The minister who does not do so, but contents himself with being a mere preacher, is the great exception now, and is thought to fulfill but half his duties. It was not so, however, seventy or eighty years ago, and Channing was a sturdy pioneer. He set the pace and pointed out the way which others since have nobly followed.

His ardor had declared itself when he was still a student. In the year that followed his graduation from college he had written to a friend from Baltimore: "It is the voice of benevolence" that speaks. "Do you

not feel new energies at the sound? Rouse, then! Consider how you may best serve mankind. We few, we happy few, we band of brothers, will unite our exertions in the cause." So it was in manhood as in youth. His church may well remember proudly, and Boston should not carelessly forget, that he engaged with generous fervor in all the established social reforms of his day, and originated several new ones. He was the friend and counselor of Horace Mann and Joseph Tuckerman and Samuel May. He labored for temperance, for the improvement of prisons, for the abolition of imprisonment for debt, for the general welfare of the laboring man, for freedom everywhere and under all conditions, for peace instead of war. The last-named cause was particularly near his heart. Some of his greatest sermons were those directed against "War." In 1800, as a boy

of twenty, he had written, "I am not for enlarging our standing army; I wish there was nothing of the kind. It is the engine which has beat down the walls of liberty in all ages. . . . A soldier by profession is too apt to forget that he is a citizen."[1] Sixteen years later an historic meeting was held in his study in the parsonage which established the Massachusetts Peace Society. This was the first peace society in America, and "its influence was felt abroad." It was the child of Channing's faith.

His views in regard to philanthropy and sociology were far in advance of his own day, and they are progressive even in our own. He foreshadowed our present distrust of attempts to reform and rescue people in the mass, or by some wholesale process. With open vision he saw the importance of the individual and championed those

[1] *Life*, p. 49.

methods in charity by which people — the words are his own — "are helped to help themselves." "The truest mode of enlarging our benevolence," he wrote, "is not to quicken our sensibility toward great masses or widespread evils, but to approach, comprehend, sympathize with, and act upon, a continually increasing number of individuals." [1]

For this reason he laid particular emphasis on the need and value of education, seeing in it "the germ of all other improvements — because all other schemes for the progress of society must fail without it."

He had something to say even in regard to the present-day question of *moral* instruction in the public schools. It appeared to him that "one branch of ethics should be particularly insisted on by the government. Every school, established by law, should be specially

[1] *Works*, p. 12.

bound to teach the duties of the citizen to the state, to unfold the principles of free institutions, and to train the young to an enlightened patriotism." [1] Had his advice, in this respect, been acted upon more wisely and fully than it has, we cannot doubt that there would be less political indifference, and less civic selfishness and corruption than we find in our country at the present time.

Channing was distinctly a patrician. He lived in easy affluence, too, after his marriage. When it is remembered that he was also a chronic invalid, and able only with the greatest difficulty to fulfill his ministerial functions, it becomes the more amazing that his interest should have extended to the depraved and vicious members of society. Yet such was the case. In thought, if not in person, he entered the prisons of his day and championed

[1] *Works*, p. 122.

those modern methods of penology which are only now being nobly carried into effect. It grieved him that "until recently government seems to have labored to harden the criminal by throwing him into a crowd of offenders, into the putrid atmosphere of a common prison;" and he saw that "to remove the convict from bad influence and to place him under the aid of good influence" are essential steps "to his moral restoration." When he reflected on "how much of the responsibility rests on the state, how many of the offenses which are most severely punished are to be traced to neglected education, to early squalid want, to temptation and exposure which society might do much to relieve," he felt "that a spirit of mercy should temper our legislation; that we should not sever ourselves so widely from our fallen brethren; that we should recognize in them the

countenance and claims of humanity; that we should strive to win them back to God."[1]

In one respect, however, Channing's forward look was most amazingly prophetic. As Mr. Chadwick has clearly pointed out in his admirable biography, Channing indicated with surprising insight and precision the fundamental principles of that most modern form of philanthropy, — the University Settlement. "One gifted man," he wrote, "with his heart in the work, who should live among the uneducated, to spread useful knowledge and quickening truth by conversation and books, by frank and friendly intercourse, by encouraging meetings for improvement, by forming the more teachable into classes, and giving to these the animation of his presence and guidance, by bringing parents to an acquaintance with

[1] *Works*, p. 185.

the principles of physical, intellectual, and moral education, by instructing families in the means and conditions of health, by using, in a word, all the methods which an active, generous mind would discover or invent for awakening intelligence and moral life; one gifted man, so devoted, might impart a new tone and spirit to a considerable circle: and what would be the result, were such men to be multiplied and combined so that a community might be pervaded by their influence!"[1]

These words were spoken in 1837, being part of an "Address on Temperance," and fifty years later the "gifted man" appeared across the ocean in the person of Arnold Toynbee, who multiplied the men about him, as Channing had suggested, until the first University Settlement was formed, and, lo! the prophet's dream became fulfilled.

[1] *Works*, p. 108.

All this, as we look back now, is seen to be very glorious. But at the time it was not wholly acceptable. Some of his friends became dissatisfied. As one of his contemporaries put it, there were fault-finders who said: "When Dr. Channing used to preach about God and the soul, about holiness and sin, we liked him, — that was Christianity. But now he is always insisting on some reform; talking about intemperance, or war, or telling us that we must remove the evils of society and educate all men. We wish he would preach the *Gospel*."

But worse was yet to come. Annoyance and complaint upon the part of certain people became open and deliberate insult when the prophet with his message from the Spirit took his stand, and bravely spoke his word against the institution of slavery. He had hesitated long; — too long the Abolitionists thought. They accused

him of caution and timidity, and they never forgave him that he stood aloof from Garrison, whose extreme measures he distrusted. But at last the turning-point was reached. The new and greater controversy was upon him. He could not avoid it and be true to his central principle. Fifteen years after the mighty Baltimore Sermon, which had proclaimed a new theology, his trumpet blew the still more stirring notes of a new humanity. The word of the Lord was strong within him, — all the more so, perhaps, that he had waited. While other ministers were silent, and many pulpits dumb, this prophet was aroused by the smoke of another spiritual battle, and put his armor on, as Sir Philip Sidney once advised that men should ever do when they heard of a righteous war.

One of the brightest scenes in Massachusetts history, and one forever

memorable in the annals of oratory, took place in Faneuil Hall when a meeting was held to protest against the murder of Lovejoy, in Alton, Illinois. The scene is remembered chiefly in connection with Wendell Phillips who electrified the audience with his first great speech, appealing to the pictured patriots whose portraits hung upon the walls. Most people do not know, however, and many have forgotten, that William Ellery Channing suggested that meeting, wrote the call for it that was published in the newspapers, sat upon the platform, and made the opening address. The historic gathering might almost be called a Channing meeting, and the little minister sat undaunted when the furious mob seemed likely to sweep the speakers from their seats into tragic silence.

Nor did he think the pulpit an unfit place from which to speak his mind upon the burning question. The mes-

sage that came to him was from the Spirit, and he delivered it in the house of God.

I wish it were possible for me to do full justice in this connection to the fervor of Channing's faith and the great devoutness of his life. Baron Bunsen called him "an antique hero with a Christian heart, a man like a Greek, a citizen like a Roman, a Christian like an apostle." Enthusiasm of conviction and the worshipful attitude of an adoring soul ever conscious of a heavenly presence were, perhaps, the two characteristics that must have marked him most distinctly in an outward sense. And, strangely enough, these two qualities are the very ones which many ministers who acknowledge his leadership and many congregations which accept his teachings most definitely lack. It would be well if both the preachers and the people of our liberal faith could receive a little

warmth from the ardor of their leader's soul.

I speak of this the more willingly because we are thus brought into the closest possible touch with the man whose greatness we commemorate. The "message from the Spirit" that he received came as did the inspiration of Isaiah, who felt that his lips had been touched by a coal of fire taken from the altar of the Most High God. It is clear enough that one great secret of Channing's power lay in the intensity of his feelings, in the greatness of his conviction; — not in his power as a writer, nor yet in his originality as a thinker, so much as in his earnestness as a believer.

When he went into the pulpit he did not go to read an essay, or to deliver a lecture; not to repeat a prayer or to perform a function, however worthy and impressive; but he went, if we may believe the accounts that

have come down to us, his soul all aflame with the thought of God, to quicken the divine elements in the natures of his fellow men. The message and the man were one; and both were given of God. "I wish I had power," he cried out over and over again, with hardly varying accent, "to give you some new conviction of the greatness of this truth. How can I bring home to you this perfection of the soul as the supreme good? Oh, for a voice of power to arouse the human spirit from its death in life, and quicken it with the consciousness of its nature."

So he ever longed and prayed; and people have told me that when he stood up in the pulpit and began to speak, a distinct hush invariably fell upon the congregation. "Never in Boston were such sermons," said Theodore Parker, "never such prayers. His word sank into men as the sun into the ground in summer to send up grass and flowers."

Whatever else we may say of him, therefore, whether as theologian, author, or reformer, it should be remembered that first and always he was a preacher. The pulpit was his throne: the church his sphere of eminent domain. Even when he wrote essays he was writing sermons that were thinly disguised. The moral strain runs through them all. His pen was smooth, his essays graceful; but his voice from the pulpit aroused the land from end to end, and rolled across the seas. "I have never seen the enthusiasm equaled," said one who listened to the sermon that he preached when Ezra Gannett was installed as his colleague. "To hear such a sermon is one of the memorable things in a man's life . . . an epoch in his existence." When he preached on the "Fall of Napoleon" in the stately and dignified King's Chapel, and reached a climax where he said, "The oppressor is fallen,

and the world is free," the people were so stirred that they burst into wild applause. He was little of stature, but had "a great presence," it is said, and his voice thrilled one "as if it issued from the inmost depths of the spirit."

Channing's faults — if we may call them such — were born of a consciousness of his greatness. He could hardly fail to understand his power; yet the knowledge never made him proud nor steeled him into hardness.

He had a wholesome scorn of thoughtless flattery; but when a laboring man wrote from England to thank him for his noble thoughts, he could say with reason, "this is honor." There was, however, an aloofness about him and a barrier of reserve which kept his best friends at a distance. He said of himself that he was "strong before the multitude, but weak before the individual." Emerson recognized this failing in him, and

wrote, "He was made for the public; his cold temperament made him the most unprofitable private companion." This told against him in many ways, and perhaps accounts for the nature of his sermons, which were almost always on great and abstract themes, seldom approaching the level of daily life. We never think of Channing as preaching on "The Need of Patience," or "The Purpose of Comfort," or "The Blessedness of Drudgery." He spoke instead upon "The Religious Principle in Human Nature," and the "Perfecting Power of Religion," and "Trust in the Living God."

Such was the nature of the task he set himself. It was for him to change the current of the world's religious thought, and not merely to calm the troubled waters of the individual soul. And how well he performed the task we do not need to reassert. His more important works were translated into

French, Italian, German, and other languages. His truths have long been current everywhere. They are now the common property of mankind, and are preached from countless pulpits by men who bear the most divergent theological names, and perhaps have never read a line that was written by the man whose teachings they set forth.

Dean Stanley placed him "in that succession of gifted men whose thoughts form the golden thread of Christian theology," classing him with Origen, Chrysostom, Erasmus, and others.

The great French skeptic and religious critic, Ernest Renan, wrote: "He was a true prophet. He heard . . . the first sounds of the bell of the future gospel. The doctrine of Channing will remain true whatever be the evolutions of science and of the free spirit."

Dr. Gordon, of the Old South Church, has published recently these words of deep significance: "More and more Channing's great influence for good is recognized among all enlightened persons. His doctrine of man has been taken up into the thought of our time as a permanent possession of faith; his sense of the place of reason in religion puts him in sympathetic touch with the leading minds in all communions to-day; his plea for liberty has been the key-note to a chorus of thinkers of many shades of belief; and his profound religiousness has done much to create those high moods of the spirit without which theology is barren and philosophy vain."

We may say with Dr. Bellows, as truly as when the words were spoken more than twenty years ago, "His is still the morning star, and is climbing the sky." And, as we look at the statue yonder in the days to come, and see

the prophet made to live again in bronze, we may remember best his own calm words at death : " I have received many messages from the Spirit."

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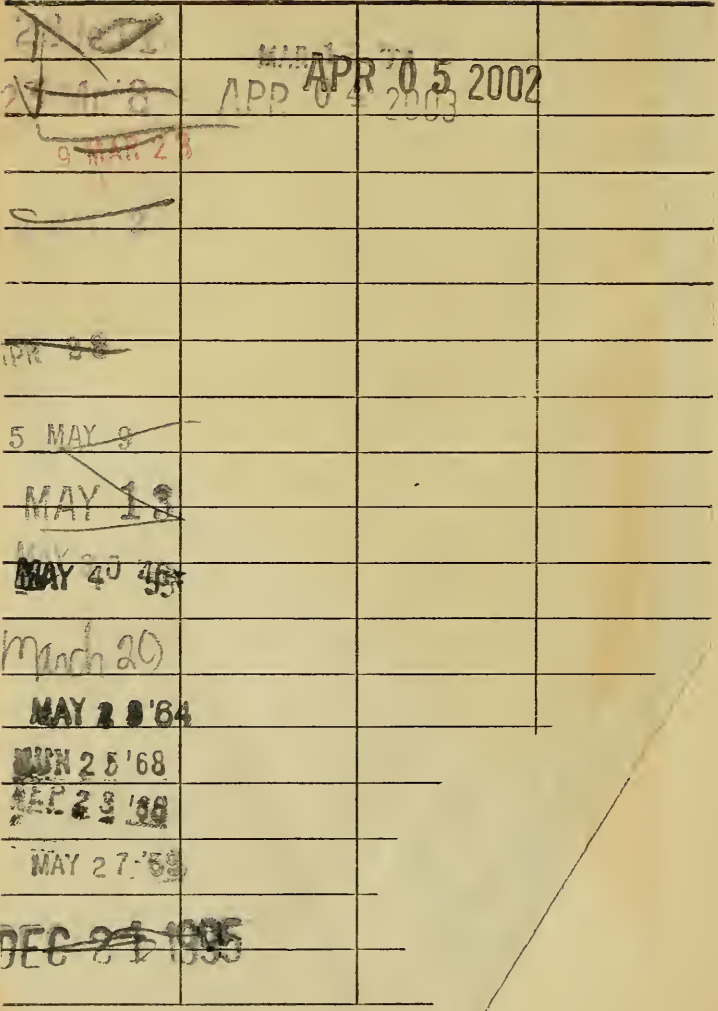

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